A precious sample of justice
A profile of Il Chul Kang

Il Chul Kang’s life, like many Korean people her age, has been marked by traumatic events and forces — war, racism, classism, sexual discrimination. But because she was abducted into military sexual slavery at a young age, she has borne more than her share of the burden forced upon her generation.

Now in the sunset of her life, Kang is receiving a tiny portion of justice through the verdict of the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal, which found the state of Japan guilty for crimes against humanity for the comfort women system. Of course, it is not enough. But it is something.

On the last day of the Tribunal, December 12, after the guilty verdict was read, the former comfort women, and the younger women, sexual violence survivors who testified at a public hearing on recent wars and conflicts, stood on the stage together in an informal ceremony. Kang and several other Korean former comfort women stood in the front line, beautifully attired in pastel hanboks. They raised and lowered their joined hands three times in the traditional salutation of “Manseoi!” or “May Korea live 10,000 years!” “Everyone laughed and cried at once — a great moment.

The conferring of that tiny portion of justice, too little and too late, was remembered. It is not enough. But it is something. The Korean Council for the Women Drafted into Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (the Korean Council), and, hoping for help, she contacted them. The Korean Council arranged for her to travel and visit, and eventually helped her to prove her citizenship. In March, 2000, it was finalized, and she moved into the House of Sharing (a communal residence for the former comfort women) with nine other residents and Hei-jin suain, the Buddhist monk who cares for all of them.

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When she first saw Korea again, she said, even the outlines of the pine trees filled her with joy. She scooped up some dirt from her hometown and carried it in her purse until she was able to return for good.

But there are no fairytale endings. Kang has a separated family again. One son immigrated to Korea with her. Her other son and daughter live in China with her three grandchil- dren. She arrived in Tokyo with hopes of visiting a nephew, who is a high official in a Tokyo-based organization for Koreans in Japan. He refused to see her, saying that he could not afford for anyone to know that his aunt is a former comfort woman. She seemed more devastated by this than by anything else she talked about.

Kang knows her own deep need for justice. “I need an apology from the Japanese government, or perhaps I need an apology from the emperor. Without it, I will never be able to forget or forgive. Nothing else will come close to satisfying that desire. The despair I feel, the anger, and all the suffering that I had to endure. Nothing will fill that need.”

Kang quickly adds, however, that her mission is more than a personal one. “I really ask American people to be educated and understand that this did really happen. I’m living and the Japanese government denies us. When I’m gone, I know there will be nothing there that will force them to admit that it ever happened. That makes me angry. People should know.”

Korean Quarterly thanks translator Kyung Park for her help in this interview, and for her gentle medical care and compassion for Kang Halmioni and the other halmionis during the conference.